

News and Features

Haunting cases: a teenager with Hodgkin's who shunned conventional therapy

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When doctors told Derek Poulin that he would need chemotherapy and radiation to save his life, the 15-year-old was adamant. He would not do it. It was the spring of 1998 and Derek had just been told that he had Hodgkin's disease. Doctors assured him that with radiation and chemotherapy, he would have an 80% chance of survival. But Poulin, a 10th-grade student in Calgary, Alberta, saw the children with cancer in the Alberta Children's Hospital and became scared. He witnessed the side effects—the nausea, the hair loss, the possibility of secondary cancers. "I thought I'd be throwing away the rest of my life."

Poulin decided on an alternative strategy, suggested by his grandfather, Ron Poulin—a new pill based on cow colostrum. His mother, Joanne Poulin, agreed. The maker of this potion, a company based in Quebec, claims that it can boost the body's immune system and kill off cancer cells. Oncologists say there is no basis for this claim.

The case threw doctors at the hospital into a quandary. The teenager and his family could not be dissuaded from their decision to opt for an unproven alternative therapy. His physicians decided not to attempt to seek a court order compelling Poulin to have conventional therapy, but they urged him to keep visiting the hospital clinic while he was taking the cow colostrum.

Four months later, Poulin was suffering night sweats. "The doctor told me if I didn't do something, I'd be dead in two months," he says. He finally agreed to chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Poulin's prognosis is good, his doctors say, but because of the delay, he needs more intense therapy over a longer period of time, which exposes him to a higher risk of heart or lung problems as well as secondary cancers caused by the therapy.

The case still haunts Dr. Max Coppes, a pediatric oncologist at Alberta Children's Hospital. He is concerned that the phenomenal popularity of alternative medicine is inducing families to shun proven conventional therapy, choosing unproven alternatives instead. Children now have over a 70% chance of surviving leukemia, compared with a 5% chance in the 1960s. The prognosis for children with Hodgkin's disease is excellent.

Instead of talking about survival, says Coppes, "We're talking about getting on with life."

Yet some parents, desperate to help their sick children, are opting for the unproven "cures." "You can never blame parents for making that decision at that time," says Dr. Coppes. The days after a child is diagnosed with cancer are pitch-black, he says. "You don't see anything. You don't hear anything." He knows: he and his wife have suffered the death of one of their children. He can understand the temptation of unproven remedies that offer a sliver of hope—and without the sickness that accompanies the conventional therapy. "These are absolutely desperate people, a very vulnerable population," Dr. Coppes says. But he believes doctors have a duty to warn patients about the potential dangers of unproven cancer remedies. "We have an obligation to protect vulnerable parents in the phase where they have just heard their child has cancer. We have to protect them from harming themselves and from being harmed by others," he says.

"To believe you can take colostrum from cows to kill cancer is absolutely ludicrous."

The pills that Poulin took are called Matol Biomune OSF Plus. Matol has been advertising the alleged benefits of this "dietary supplement for immune system support" on its Web site, in literature it hands out, and on the company's information line. The potion contains extracts of colostrum from a "select herd of cows raised in strict organic conditions," along with astragalus, "a traditional Chinese herb known to stimulate immune response." The theory, according to the company, is that the substance will boost the body's immune system by increasing the activity of natural killer cells "whose mission is to seek and destroy any harmful invaders that penetrate the body's initial defense positions." The company even offers a 30-day money-back guarantee.

Dr. Sheila Weitzman at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children voices the feelings of many oncologists: "To believe you can take colostrum from cows to kill cancer is absolutely ludi-

crous." But scientific skepticism doesn't bother the makers of Matol, based in Lachine, Quebec. "I believe it is helpful," Matol chairman J.F. Robert Bolduc says. "Any product that enhances and supports the immune system is going to be helpful. But is it a cure? Absolutely not. It doesn't claim to be."

In some cases, Canadian courts have allowed doctors to impose a life-saving therapy even if parents want to deny it to their children. While parents can choose to shun treatment for themselves, the courts have said, they cannot deny it to a young child, who is seen as unable to choose. But in order to take the legal route, doctors have to prove that the therapy offers a good chance of survival. The child also has to be too young to make an informed decision. Canadian courts have ruled both ways, depending on the child's age, the sickness, and the remedy proposed by doctors.

Because Derek Poulin was 15, Coppes decided to forgo the legal route. "This is a teenager," says Dr. Coppes. "How can you force a teenager?" He also wanted to keep the door open for the boy and his family to return to the hospital if they changed their minds.

Poulin's mother, Joanne, remembers the heavy pressure from doctors to make her son take conventional therapy. "They told me I was killing my son, that I was signing his death warrant," she says. Frightened by being ill, Derek Poulin didn't continue taking the Matol—instead, he ran away from home. He was getting increasingly ill until finally his mother coaxed him home, in August, telling him that he would be dead by Christmas without chemotherapy. Despite the success of the chemotherapy, Poulin and his mother still believe the Matol product might have helped.

"We never had an opportunity to give it a chance," says Joanne Poulin. "I still believe in my heart that we could have put it into remission."

"I've watched Derek waste away for the last four months [on chemotherapy]. He throws up every day. He has no hair. He's lost 30 pounds. The cure is almost evil. It's barbaric. There's got to be a better way."

If there is a better way, says Dr. Coppes, it should first be properly tested to see if it works and if it is safe.